

Red-Head Dilemma

by RageRunsStill

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Summary: Laura already has problems on her plate. But when Otto Malpense shows up, she thinks he's out to get her job - yet another problem. Yet the problems don't stop there. Franz gets deathly sick, and now she has to work with her new enemy to save her old friend's life. AU. T just in case. Title subject to change.

1. The New Recruit

****A/N:** PLEASE READ, KIND OF IMPORTANT!**

This is one of my favorite styles of fanfiction writing: taking characters, heightening certain characteristics in them, and putting them in a new, AU scenario. I've been doing this kind of stuff for the better half of a year, give or take, and I still love it. That's what's happened here. That said, the characters might be a little different than you're used to; Otto may be more self-absorbed, Laura might be more temperamental, Nero may be more scatterbrained - it's all part of the story, I assure you. It's not because I'm a bad writer, or because I got the characters OOC, it's actually supposed to be like that. Just as a warning.

_Also, in this particular story, Laura Brand, Otto Malpense, et cetera, are twenty-three, and not villains. H.I.V.E. does exist... but it doesn't mean the same thing anymore. It's AU. No evil H.I.V.E. You'll see what I mean when you read it.

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_I hope you enjoy it despite the unconventionality of it, or maybe even because of it. Thanks for taking the time to read this!

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><p>Laura Brand watched as the spunky blonde in front of her picked

yet another cherry out of the bowl, gripped it firmly in her teeth and pulled the stem out with her fingers, merely dropping it to the ground as if there wasn't a garbage can two feet away. She chewed contentedly, smiling innocently at the Scot.<p>

Glowering, Laura bent down and picked up the stem, throwing it in the waste receptacle, aware of the blonde's eyes following her movements. "You know, there's a trash can right there." Laura irritably pointed at the can. "You could throw them away."

"I could," the blonde agreed. Her American accent was obvious. She threw another stem on the ground. "But why, if you're standing right there to pick them up for me?"

"Because I'm your partner, not to mention your friend," Laura replied, bending down again, knowing from experience that telling the American to pick it up herself would be fruitless. She wanted to whack the smug blonde when a cherry stem landed on her head.

"I work alone."

Shelby Trinity was many things â€" including things such as stuck up, nosy, pertly conceited, beautiful, smart and stealthy â€" and one of those things was being rather unfriendly when she felt like it. She cared deeply for her friends; the hard part was actually being considered a friend on her side of the relationship.

And although Shelby had said it many times, Laura doubted she actually was a friend of the superspy.

"Oh, yeah? Then who was up with you for _twenty-three hours_ straight just last month? Yourself?" Laura frowned. "You couldn't have completed that mission without me!"

Shelby, who also happened to be the CIA's top stealth-and-retrieval operative, just shrugged and dropped another cherry stem on the floor.

Laura growled inwardly, and considered picking it up and jamming it down the blonde's throat, but decided against it; the CIA couldn't afford to start fighting amongst itself, even if a piece of it was acting totally selfish. Instead, she reached into her leather shoulder bag and pulled out some reports, pushing them into Shelby's hand. "Here," she said, "give Mr. Fanchu a call and tell him to report the information on these documents to the president."

Wing Fanchu was the head of the Secret Service, not to mention a not-too-secret crush of Shelby's. There were some under-the-radar rumors that Mr. Fanchu liked Shelby, too, but in this line of work lies are simple to tell and hard to distinguish. And Laura knew that if she wanted Shelby to do anything for her, calling Mr. Fanchu was about the only thing she would do without complaint.

Shelby looked at the papers with an expression of mild contempt, but why pass up an excuse to call Mr. Tall, Dark and Japanese? "All right, I'll give Wing a call."

Laura was halfway to the door to exit the lounge when she stopped and glanced back. "You know, flame or not, Mr. Fanchu is still technically our superior; maybe you shouldn't call him by his first

name?"

"I'll tell you what," the spy replied, "I'll call him Mr. Fanchu when you quit worrying about everything."

It was quite obvious that the conversation was over, so Laura walked out, shaking her head.

As she walked down the hallway toward her office in the technical wing, she scanned some important documents. Many bad things were happening around the planet â€" robberies, attempts on the president's life, the head of CIA Security suspiciously and inconveniently getting a broken leg â€" and Dr. Maximilian Nero, head of the CIA's Intelligence Division, was convinced they were all linked. But, of course, the coffee maker breaks and he imagines some horrible conspiracy or security breach.

â€| Come to think of it, the coffee maker broke, too.

Finally, she reached the door to her office. She was just about to place her hand on the scanner when-

"Miss Trinity and Miss Brand, please report to my office."

-Nero called.

Laura groaned. Had she and Shelby done something wrong? Or, more accurately, had _Shelby_ done something wrong and blamed Laura for it? It wouldn't be the first time.

She turned and sprinted down the hall, back the way she had come. When she finally reached the entrance to Nero's office, Shelby was just about to put her hand to the scanner.

"So, what'd you do this time, Brand?" she joked.

Laura didn't bother replying.

The door opened to a room of deep red walls lined with certificates and framed newspaper articles, with a mahogany desk in the middle and a tall black leather chair behind it. Two smaller chairs sat in front of the intimidating desk.

Nero smiled when they walked in. "Ah, Miss Brand, Miss Trinity. How nice to see you. Please, sit down."

Shelby plopped down in a chair, and that was the first time Laura noticed that the other chair was occupied.

A man with spiky white hair and blazing blue eyes was seated in it. You could tell from the slight wrinkles on his face that the overconfident, slightly teasing smirk he wore was a permanent fixture.

Great, Laura thought. Now she was going to look ridiculous standing in the middle of the room like some sort of retarded-

"Here", the man said, over exaggerated sweetness slathered thickly on his words. "You can have _my_ chair." He grinned. Somehow, it didn't look friendly.

"Uh, thanks," Laura said, trying to sit down and not get near him at the same time. She watched as he went and stood between her and Shelby.

"Ladies, this is Mr. Otto Malpense. Perhaps you've heard of him," Nero began.

"The man who knocked that stuck up Prime Minister off his high horse!" Shelby said, laughing. "A pleasure to meet a man with such style, Otto!"

"It was nothing, really," he said, although his tone wasn't very modest. It wasn't the English accent, either.

Laura didn't say anything, unwilling to admit that she hadn't heard of an Otto Malpense or the dethroning of the Prime Minister of England. She hoped she wouldn't be dragged into the conversation.

"Mr. Malpense has just finished training at the Hall of Invention Viewings and Exploration, and has agreed to come help with your current project after having my invitation relayed by my good friend Professor Theodore Pike," Nero said, cutting back in.

"You... studied at H.I.V.E. as well?" Laura asked, shocked. She had trained at H.I.V.E., and had, at the time, been Professor Pike's best student, which is how she had landed a spot in the CIA as their head of technological advancements. Recently, however, her programs hadn't been working right. Every single one failed for one reason or another. She had begun fearing that Nero would find a replacement for her... Had he found one?

"Yes," Otto said. "Professor Pike even said I was his best student since..." He tapped his chin with his finger, and Laura couldn't tell if the thought was real or fake. "... well, you. I assume you're Laura Brand?"

She nodded mutely. He mimicked the movement, as if it was obvious.

"I had a feeling you two would get along well, since you both have quite the affinity for technology," Nero said.

"I think the last thing we need is another computer geek in the mix," Shelby complained. "They're never any fun."

"Which reminds me," Nero said, turning to Otto. "Mr. Malpense, you said you brought something that may help us with this endeavor?"

"Yes, I did." The Brit reached into his pocket and pulled out a black PDA-like device. He flipped open the top. "H.I.V.E..mind, please come introduce yourself."

Suddenly, a blue holographic head appeared hovering over the PDA's screen. "Hello, Dr. Nero, Miss Trinity, Miss Brand; I am H.I.V.E..mind â€" how may I be of assistance?"

Laura's mouth fell open, and she stared agape at the head. "W... What

is that?" she asked in awe.

"I am a supercomputer artificial intelligence, built by Professor Theodore Pike and Mr. Otto Malpense," H.I.V.E..mind said.

"We named him H.I.V.E..mind because H.I.V.E. is where he was created," Otto explained. "He's highly intelligent, and advanced by years. If anyone can help, it's him."

"Fantastic. If he's really as good as you say he is--"

"Which he is," Otto assured.

"--then this is possibly the best idea I've had in quite awhile," Nero finished. "I take it you have direct access to him from here?"

"Correction, I actually have him with me." The Brit tapped the back of his head. "The entirety of his programming is stored within a microchip that has been implanted in the back of my head since birth... Or so I've been told." His confident smile slipped slightly "â€" yea, his whole demeanor â€" but it was back strikingly fast. "Obviously, though, I've no idea for certain."

"A... _microchip_? In your brain?" Nero blinked. "Large enough to hold an AI?"

"It's a long story. And one I don't really know." Otto shifted his weight, but glanced up to look Nero in the eye. "His processing power is limited by the capability of myself and the chip, but he should still be a great help. If not, I have a few ideas we can try."

Nero nodded calmly. "All right. Now for assignments. Miss Brand" - he turned to Laura - "you'll be working with Mr. Malpense until further notice. I need my best people on the job. Also, I think you should start by pulling security footage from the White House's cameras."

"But... we already asked, Dr. Nero," Laura pointed out, trying to keep from digging her fingernails into her palms and failing miserably. "They wouldn't give them to us, even with Mr. Fanchu as support."

"I think they suspected subterfuge on either our part or his," Nero sighed. "They can be so cynical sometimes. However, that said, you may have to use other means to get that tape."

"Such as?" Shelby asked, always eager to do something against protocol.

Nero raised an eyebrow. "I think you know, Miss Trinity. Miss Brand and Mr. Malpense will try to hack into the files remotely, and if that doesn't work we'll send you in."

"_YESSSS!_" Shelby cried, jumping out of her chair.

"Any questions?" Nero asked.

After a couple seconds of waiting to see if anyone else did, Otto said, "When do we start?"

Nero smiled. "Tomorrow, bright and early!"

* * *

><p>Laura whipped around to face Malpense, and stared him down with a fiery intensity. He met her fire with a cool gaze and a couple of raised eyebrows. The door to the office had already slid shut, and Shelby was oblivious to Laura's rage, so soon she, too, had slipped from sight and sound.<p>

"Who do you think you are?" Laura demanded. "You and your high-tech, blue-headed toy can't just waltz in here and try to take my job."

"First off, I don't waltz; I strut." He smirked. "Second, my 'blue-headed toy' doesn't really move at all; he more like zaps, or transfers, or teleports--"

"I don't care what he d--"

"And thirdly, I'm not trying to take your job; Nero called me. I can't really help that I'm better than you. Especially now. It's a li-ttle for that, don't you think?"

"I don't care! I don't care that you're wearing the CIA's uniform, that you invented the world's first self-aware AI, that you have a microchip implanted in your brain, or that you're stuck up beyond measure! If you start trying to get rid of me, I'll--"

"At this rate, I won't have to plot to get rid of you if I decide you're a threat --" Nero will ship you out way before then," Malpense replied, brushing past her. "Perhaps you should try being a little nicer to your new coworker if you don't want that to happen!" he called over his shoulder.

2. The Red Head Caf  

****A/N:**** _ Okay, just as a warning, I would like to tell you another bit about the story._

_Sometimes (read: usually) in the story, Otto is referred to as Malpense. This is because Laura doesn't like him/is mad at him, and since the story is told from her point of view for most of the time (some future scenes may switch for a short period), Otto must be Malpense to express her anger or resentment. However, some scenes, like in this chapter, Otto is actually called Otto. Why is this? Because Laura is either not mad at him, feeling sorry for him, or with other people whom she doesn't want to know her hatred toward Otto. That's why, when she was with Shelby and Otto in Nero's office, she referred to him as Otto: she hadn't known him well, and was with Nero. However, the second they left the office he was called "Malpense" - she had officially decided that she hated him.

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_So, to shorten this complicated explanation, please note that the switching back and forth between Otto and Malpense is totally normal and actually meant to help tell the story.

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* * *

><p>Despite everything, the next day began as usual for Laura.<p>

She was the first awake in the little two bedroom apartment she shared with Shelby the Stuck-Up. She got out of bed and walked over to her squeaky bedroom door, opening it only far enough to get out so she wouldn't wake her roommate. Directly across the hall was Shelby's room. Laura turned right out of her door, toward the kitchen for breakfast, which was the usual Honey Nut Cherrios and milk with a glass of orange juice and a laptop to check her emails.

No new mail! flashed on the laptop's screen, and Laura closed the lid with a sigh. Her parents hadn't contacted her in awhile. But they were probably just busy... Her dad's new job had forced them to move, after all.

She chewed happily on her Cherrios, savoring the sweetness of the honey, the tang of the juice and the creaminess of the milk. Sitting there, in her kitchen, the whole ordeal with Malpense seemed more like a bad dream. He wasn't going to take her job or turn Nero against her. He didn't even exist. She would go into the office, per usual, and greet Dave, the janitor, who would be cleaning the conference room's big window that took up a whole wall. Then she would go to her desk, in her office, in the technical wing of the building and boot up her computer and check her notifications to see if she was supposed to give a lecture on technology to some new recruits, or attend a meeting, or go out to lunch with Lucy Dexter, her friend in the social media department. Then, after that, she might crunch some numbers or tweak some programs or invent some new gadget for Shelby to use on a mission. Then she might go out to lunch with Shelby, who might tell Laura a story from back when the blonde was a master jewel thief known only as _The Wraith_. Then she would come back from lunch, finish what she had been doing before she left, go home, have dinner, and maybe take a nice bubble bath before bed. Yes. That would be nice.

And she was almost able to convince herself that it had all been a dream. She said hello to Dave ("Hey, Dave! How's it going?" Laura called, poking her head through the open conference room door. Dave turned and smiled a gape-toothed grin, saying, "Oh, ya know, it's goin'."), she marched through the technical wing proudly (though her pride faltered when she couldn't seem to find the right key to the office), she turned on her computer and checked her notifications (Nero's birthday was in a week â€" she had totally forgotten!), and she even started tweaking yet another of her failing programs â€" but that's where the fantasy-like regularity ended.

"Hello?"

Laura turned. It was a rule that you knocked before entering the red-head's office, assuming you like your head on your shoulders and your butt under your hips. It was a rule that most people learn quickly. It was a rule that only one person would be ignorant of... or dumb enough to ignore.

"What are you doing in my office, Malpense?"

Immediately, the uncertain expression vanished from his face, once again replaced with that irritating, confident smirk. "Well, well. Looks like I followed the directions perfectly."

"Answer the question!"

"This is my new office â€" didn't Nero tell you?"

Laura frowned. "No, he didn't."

He walked the rest of the way in and swung a chair around so the back faced Laura; he then proceeded to sit on it backwards so he could cross his arms over the top. The smirk stayed. "Yeah, he said something about that since we're working together on this big case, which has a file I've yet to read, it would be easier for us if we shared a workspace." He ran a hand through his hair, causing it to spike even more (and somehow look even better), pausing when his hand reached the back of his neck. "That doesn't put a cramp in your day, now, does it?" His ice-blue eyes blinked innocently. It couldn't have been more spurious.

But Laura smiled sweetly. "Of course it doesn't. Why would it?"

"Oh, that's good." A cheeky smile. "I wouldn't want to do that to you, my dear Miss Brand." Malpense stood up. "For now, I have to use a card table as a desk until I can get a real one. I have to go get it. Can I get you anything when I come back?"

"No, because I can't trust it won't come with an extra ingredient."

Malpense rolled his eyes. "Please, like I could get away with bringing poison in here."

"I was thinking more along the lines of saliva, but thanks for the warning." She turned back to her computer screen. "There's a corner back there you can use, if you want." Without turning around, she pointed behind her at an empty corner on the other side of the rather spacious room.

"Oh, I think I'll put my desk right next to yours, if it's all the same."

Soon, Laura heard no sounds other than her fingers hitting the keys on her keyboard. Malpense must have left. She leaned back and sighed. Of all the places, why did Nero station Malpense in her office? Isn't that what live chat and email are for? Quick communication? She could only hope he was joking about putting his desk beside hers. That would be the icing on the cake, and she would bet just about anything that he knew it, too.

"Honey, I'm home," Malpense announced as he walked through the door with the card table. Sure enough, he half-dragged it over to the area beside her desk. When he had it set up (a process with which she lifted not a finger of help), it barely fit between her desk and the wall.

"Well!" Malpense clapped his hands, staring happily at the finished "desk," now complete with a computer, mouse, keyboard, mouse pad, and

a couple other office-y things, as well as H.I.V.E..mind's PDA. A "Blackbox" as Malpense had called it when inquired about the strange device. "How fortunate that the table fit so snugly! I could tell you were worried about it."

Once again, Laura smiled, and with as much sugar in her voice as she could muster, said, "Oh, you can bet I was."

He laughed. "I knew it! So, what's the first order of business?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," the Scot replied. "Coding and such, mostly. You'll catch on, I'm sure."

He drummed his fingers on the desk, staring at the side of her head like he was trying to burn a hole through it. Finally, he said, "That's all the information I get?"

"Pretty much."

He frowned. "I take it you're not going to take my advice from yesterday? About being nicer?"

"Why would I be nice to you when you're not nice to me?"

"Haven't you ever heard of the Golden Rule?"

"I don't live by it."

Malpense shrugged. "Can't say I do, either, but still..." He shook his head. "Don't think I don't know what's been going on here. Your programs have been failing... You need my help, even if you don't want to admit it."

She whipped around to face him. "Can't you just play Solitaire or something, like a good little code monkey?"

He threw up his hands. "Fine. Whatever. You'll come to your senses soon enough, I'm sure." And with that, he turned to his own computer's monitor, resolving to try to find something else to do.

* * *

><p>By the time lunch rolled around, Laura was ready to go nuts.<p>

First, Malpense spent time blaring rock music from his speakers. Laura had asked him politely to turn it off ("_Will you turn that disrespectful junk off_!?" she screamed over the racket. He turned, blinking at her as if he was stunned. "_What_? I can't hear you! Music â€" too loud!"), but he hadn't complied, so she gave up. Thankfully, he grew tired of ruining his hearing and moved on to something else.

Then he decided that it would be a fantastic idea to make a house of cards. Surprisingly, he was actually quite good at it; he had a steady hand and only knocked it down a few times. Of course, when he (_FINALLY!_) ran out of cards, he whipped out his camera phone and started snapping pictures. Then he asked H.I.V.E..mind if he could take one. Then he asked Laura if she had a camera. Both answers were

no, but after a couple more tries he seemed satisfied with the photos his "yucky" camera phone had taken. Of course, that wasn't the end of the annoyance; he had to knock it down! Cards went everywhere: on the floor, the table, Laura, her keyboard, everywhere. When inquired about helping to pick them up, Laura ignored the man and continued to work. He had them all picked up in five minutes, anyway.

After that, he decided to draw a picture of Laura. So he got a clipboard and a few pieces of paper and a pencil and started to draw. Slow, steady, sure strokes. When he was done, it was scarily intricate. The papers strewn about on her desk, the way her hair didn't want to stay in its pigtails and hung down the side of her face, the picture of her parents that hung on the wall. The only flaw was the computer screen: instead of lines of code, a game of Mahjong was being played. When he showed it to her, she couldn't help but admit that it was pretty good.

Then he brought up an audio editing program. He was halfway through some really weird song that seemed to be a mix of armpit farts and someone screaming the word "no" when Shelby came in and asked if they wanted to go to lunch.

"Is that question directed at me, too?" Malpense asked innocently, with a sideways glance at Laura that nobody seemed to notice. "I'm hungry."

"Of course it is, silly! You're part of the Alphas now; that's our group. Only high-ranking CIA agents get to wear this highly tacky uniform," Shelby said, grinning and motioning to her black jumpsuit and boots.

"Great! Thanks." Malpense grinned back.

"Oh, Laura!" Shelby turned to her friend. "Franz and Nigel are also coming along, because Nigel invited us to lunch â€" I figured you wouldn't mind, so I went ahead and accepted his offer."

You figured wrong, Laura thought, but was too nice to say. "The more the merrier. Where are we going?"

"Some new 'organic' restaurant that just went in a couple of blocks away. Not the kind of place I would normally go, but Nigel said it's delicious and he would buy. You know me," she said, and laughed. "Truly, the best way to a girl's heart is through her stomach!"

"I think I know where you're talking about," Malpense said as the threesome walked down the hall to the main entrance to meet Franz and Nigel. "'The Red Head CafÃ©,' right? I heard it's great."

"It is also being quite the high-tech place! Hello, Shelby, Laura, and boy I am not knowing!"

Laura had been staring at the floor, but looked up at the sounding of Franz Argentblum's bad English.

Franz had originally been from a family of chocolate makers in Germany, but hadn't wanted to go into the business; he far more enjoyed sharpshooting and stealth tactics. When the CIA had heard about this, they had offered him an internship with Colonel Francisco, the physical education teacher who breaks in all the

newbies. Naturally, Franz accepted with a powerful zeal.

Nigel Darkdoom was rather different in that manner. His whole family had been CIA agents at one point or another, and his family wanted him to carry on that legacy. However, Nigel wasn't very interested; and, as they found, not very talented. But after awhile of wondering, they found out he was quite good with plants. When the CIA was contacted, it turned out that they had been looking for a man to take over the botanical department. Everyone thought that Diabolus Darkdoom, Nigel's deceased father, would have been proud.

"Uh, hi," Otto called ahead, waving. "I'm Otto Malpense â€" I'm the new recruit that Dr. Nero had sent for."

"Hi, Otto," Nigel said, rather shyly. "I'm Nigel."

"Ah, I am seeing it all now! Hello, Otto! Welcome to the Alphas!" Franz waved erratically. "You must be pretty good if you did not have to go through Colonel Francisco first! I would be knowing if you had â€" I am being his intern, Franz Argentblum."

"I'm the best, Franz, as you will soon learn," Otto said coolly.

The paunchy man clapped his hands. "Goody! Now, let us be going before all the good foods are bought up and eaten right before our eyes!" He turned and hurried away.

"Wait, Franz!" Nigel called after his friend. "They won't run out â€" it's a restaurant!"

* * *

><p>The front of the building was nothing special, unless you count the logo. When one hears "Red Head CafÃ©," they might think of a smiling red-headed girl, or boy, or dog in a wig, or something. But few, when they hear that, quite literally think of a red head. A picture of a red head â€" like, with red skin and hair and everything â€" stared back at the quintet, as his red hand raised a glass to his lips. Stitched across his red pinstripe suit were the words "Red Head CafÃ©."

"How... charming," Shelby managed.

"It tastes a lot better than their trademark looks â€" come on!" Nigel held open the door and ushered them in happily. "My favorite is probably the clam chowder with barley bread, or maybe the asparagus sautÃ©ed with artichokes and onions and bean sprouts and shiitake mushrooms in a cinnamon basil sauce with a side of sweet potato fries." He licked his lips ravenously as he looked at the menu. "Or perhaps their version of a supreme pizza is best. It has sausage, mushrooms, onions, banana peppers, bell peppers, green olives, black olives, pepperoni, cheese, bean sprouts, and fresh oregano leaves that they dry and crush right here in the store! And instead of just red pizza sauce, they mix it with a white garlic pizza sauce, which gives it a great flavor."

Otto rubbed the back of his neck as he stared at the menu. "Do they have any... _normal_ food?"

Nigel's eyes narrowed a little. "What do you mean by 'normal'?"

"You know, soup, sandwiches... CafÃ© food?"

Nigel opened his mouth to say something, but Otto cut him off.

"_Without_ avocado, cucumber or goat cheese!"

Nigel's mouth closed. But he opened it again to reply, "You can request for that stuff to be taken off."

"But then all I'd be eating is bread!" He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Never mind. I'll get that pizza you were talking about. What's it called?"

"'Supreme Overlord,'" Nigel recited. "You'll like it. It's good."

"Let's hope I do," Otto muttered under his breath, but only Shelby, who was standing beside him, heard, and she giggled.

"I know what I shall be ordering!" Franz announced, much louder than necessary. A few glances were thrown his way.

"And that is?" Nigel asked eagerly, always a social butterfly when it came to his favorite subjects.

"The 'Iron Fist' sandwich, with the feta cheese, cucumber, avocado, hormone-free ham, tomatoes and the secret sauce!" Franz grinned. "This was a great idea, Nigel!"

"I wouldn't say that before you taste the dirt â€" I mean, the food," Otto murmured to Shelby, who giggled again.

"I'm going to get the Red Head special," Shelby concluded when her laughter had stopped.

Laura sighed. "I guess I'll get the Overlord Aswan."

"I'm getting the Amazon Reign, which was the dish I was telling you about before with the asparagus," Nigel said, stepping into the line.

"Ah, Nigel, back again, I see," said the cashier when it was their turn to order.

"You bet! I even got my friends to come try it." He grinned.

"What'll ya have?"

"Amazon Reign."

"Iron Fist!"

"The... Supreme Overlord?"

"Uh... Overlord Aswan, please."

"I'll take the Red Head special."

"Okay, great!" The cashier grinned. "I'll bring that out to you when it's done."

After paying, Nigel led the whole group over to his favorite table by the window, where he could watch the people on their lunch breaks hurry to their favorite restaurants to eat their favorite meals. It was a beautiful view, a quaint little table, and everybody would have liked to eat there. But alas, as Otto so bluntly put it, "Um... You do know there are five of us, right?" Nigel was so used to eating lunch by himself that the little two-seater table by the window had seemed like a no-brainer. Why wouldn't somebody want to eat there? His logic was correct, as were his intentions, so nobody held it against him. Instead, Laura led them to a new table, a round one, made to hold five people.

"Okay, the Iron Fist, the Amazon Reign, the Red Head Special, the Overlord Aswan, and the Supreme Overlord. Can I get you all anything else?" Everybody shook their head. "All righty, then. Call if you need me."

Immediately, everybody dug in. Otto had to admit that the Supreme Overlord wasn't bad. Laura could say the same thing about the Overlord Aswan. So could Shelby about the Special and Franz about the Iron Fist. Nobody was upset about the food or the service.

"I guess I owe you, Nigel. This was actually really good," Shelby admitted as they left. "But I thought you said the place was high-tech. It looked like a plain old café."

"They have self-cleaning tables," Nigel explained. "I don't know how they do it, but there's rarely a dirty table in there. Also, things like the stove and the oven and even the cash register are voice-, touch-, or motion-activated." He nodded. "It's cool."

"I wish I could have seen that," Otto admitted. "I'm a fan of that stuff."

"Me too," Laura agreed.

Otto side-glanced at her. "For different reasons."

"How do you know?" Laura asked. "You don't even know what my reasons are!"

"Oh, just trust me, we only share a few."

"Oooh... I am not feeling the best..." Franz moaned.

"It's no wonder; you finished the Iron Fist, which is the largest sandwich they have!" Nigel laughed. "I'm impressed, truly."

"Thanks, Nigel," Franz said with a grin. "You are a great friend."

"You too, buddy," Nigel replied. "You too."

End
file.